

Language learning, incarnate

By [Diane Roth](#)

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I have been thinking for some time now that I would like to learn a little Spanish. There are a number of Spanish-speaking immigrants in our community, and a Hispanic Seventh-day Adventist congregation meets in our sanctuary on Saturday morning. Some of the congregation members are fluent in English, but not all of them. It has piqued my language-learning curiosity.

When I first started thinking about learning Spanish, of course I went out and bought the prettiest, flashiest set of Spanish flash cards I could find. They are quite attractive, if I must say so myself. They haven't helped me learn any Spanish, but they are sitting right there in my office.

I have asked other people how to go about beginning to learn Spanish. I have gotten a variety of advice, including self-directed courses with tapes and CDs, online resources, and apps for an iPhone. I downloaded a free app that makes language learning into a sort of game.

Here's my confession, though: even though I am an introvert, I can't imagine myself learning a language from a book, a set of tapes, or a website. I can't imagine myself learning a language by myself.

Part of it is accountability. I can't imagine myself sitting down at the same time every day, or a different time every day, and remembering to take the books or the tapes out, or get on the website and do the lessons. I am sadly afraid (and this is a character flaw) that my language learning self-discipline would last all of two days.

But mostly I can't imagine learning a language by myself. I can't imagine trying to learn a language without the motivation of actually speaking it to someone else, even if the words are as simple as "buenos dias."

When I lived in Japan, my best language teacher was the wife of one of the local pastors. I went to visit her every week, and we sat down and had a conversation. I don't remember any more whether we had a textbook or not. But the main thing

was, she didn't know any English. If I wanted to communicate, if I was curious about a Japanese custom or a food or anything else, I had to throw caution to the wind and just ask her, with whatever language tools I had. If she had questions for me, I had to try to answer, and keep trying until she figured out what I was trying to say.

Now that I think about it, she wasn't my only language teacher. I had many others, all of them good, in their own way: the four year olds at the preschool, the children in my church's Sunday school, the history teacher whose desk was next to mine in the Japanese high school where I worked. The parents of some of my students, clerks in department stores, people I sat next to on the train: they were all my teachers. Because I wanted to know them, to learn about their lives, I wanted to learn more.

Of course, language is a multifaceted thing. It is not just speaking, but listening; not just listening but understanding; not just understanding but wanting to understand. It is not just words on a page, but words in the air, between people. It is not just denotation, but connotation. A language suggests a world, and opens the door to that world, if only a crack, at first.

It occurs to me that faith is a language too, even a strange one, from a strange land, which sometimes feels far away. But does anyone really want to know the language of faith any more, to open the door, just a crack, and to see what the people know who live there? Does anyone want to sit down across the table from them, and and listen, and try to understand, and find out what it's like to walk on water, or to find your five small loaves of bread suddenly multiplied?

Faith is a language. I can't learn it by myself.

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